caves & caving

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Cover photograph Sharon Roy ascending Jounikas Shaft Nr. Uradeton, Greece.

Photo Chris Sowe

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Obtainable from-B.M.Ellis, 30 Main Road, Westonzoyland, Bridgewater, Somerset.

price 50p **Free to members** **Copyright**

subs £2·50 ISSN 0142-1832 **B.C.R.A.**

Caves and Caving is the Bulletin of the British Cave Research Association

THE AUDE GORGE EXPEDITION 1979

Jerry Murland

Situated some 60 km from the Mediterranean coast the Aude Gorge maintains an impressive course from the upper Pyrennean alpine pastures near Fontrabiouse, (Altitude 2,608m), to its eventual senility near Quillan. An overall distance of 40km, characterised by near vertical sides, in places only wide enough for the road; the gorge presents an exciting prospect for any visiting expeditions. Where the vertical gives way to a less acute angle, typical french mediterranean deciduous forest grows, along with an abundance of thorn, making surface work difficult and tedious. Large areas above the gorge which are riddled with shafts lie unexplored because of thick vegetation.

One of the primary objectives of this cave diving reconnaissance was the exploration of resurgences that had previously been looked at in 1977 by Kev Drakely and Dave Malley. In addition, they had spotted a number of entrances and the potential for exploration seemed good, certainly good enough to return in force. The expedition was conceived amid drunken revellry in a well known Buxton ale house and as with many such ideas, upon sober reflection of the problems involved, the work needed to ensure the expedition arrived 'on target' seemed enormous. However, the necessary money and gear materialised along with the uncertain shape of a borrowed J.2 van of doubtful vintage, which, after much en-route adjustment, arrived in tact. It was

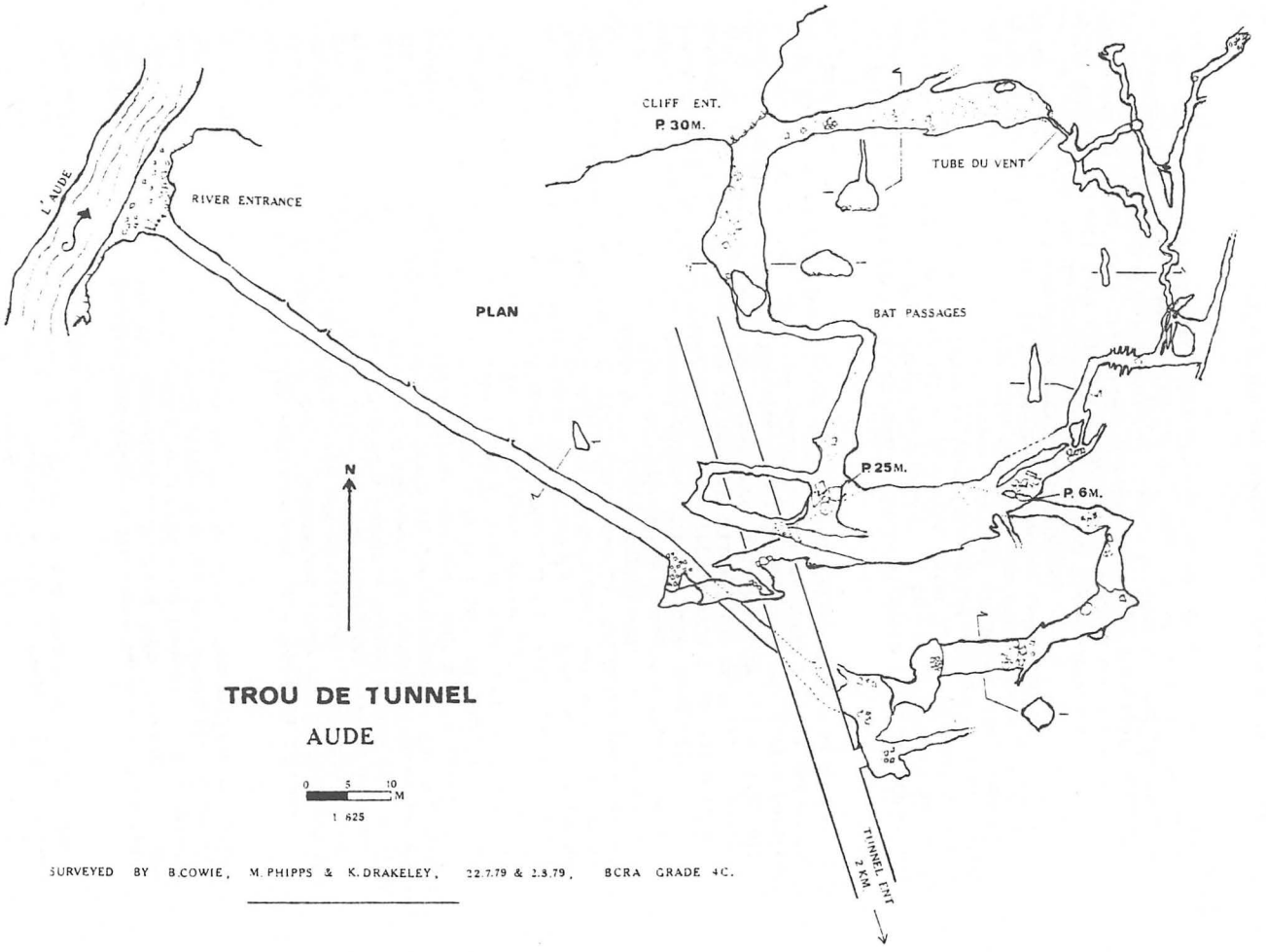
apparent that quite enough excitement had been had on the journey down, without considering caving as well! Transport was supplemented by two private vehicles and Mick Phipp's 'Bonny'. (Mick won the 'Masochist of the year' award for his 2,000 mile bike ride).

The campsite at Axat nestles amid towering limestone walls providing spectacular scenery and during the time spent recovering from 'van-lag' it became obvious that there were more entrances in the area than could be coped with and certainly enough work to keep everyone occupied for months. However, the local vino provided a welcome distraction along with various attempts to drink the campsite bar dry.

Although a great number of sites were examined, only the more important explorations will be dealt with here. A detailed study can be found in the expedition report together with surveys and photographs. Probably one of the most important sites in the gorge was the resurgence cave of La Font Maure. French dye tests had indicated a possible master system of some 6 km long and 700m deep; past efforts had included the descent of numerous shafts, the deepest being 100m and abortive dives in the resurgence. The resurgence produced three static sumps and a narrow slot was found just outside the entrance. The water was crystal clear, very inviting and immediately dubbed 'La Source H.P.' The slot proved to be the entrance to a flooded pot which joined a large passage at - 12m; diving here, Steve Tucker eventually made a connection with a second pot that Jerry Murland had descended from within the cave, both divers arriving at a large passage at -17m. While Tim Nixon explored a large bedding, more progress was made upstream by Murland to an area of phreatic breakdown. Further dives over the following few days led the divers to a flooded chamber and a larger continuation of the passage. A maximum depth of -25m was dived by Murland who followed a flooded rift which continued beyond his deepest point. Finally after much difficult route finding, Tucker surfaced in a large airspace with a cascading inlet passage some 15m above; access to the inlet proved too difficult without aid. A later dive by Nixon and Tucker ended with Nixon making a difficult climb to reach a sumped continuation. Very disappointed the divers returned to base. Lack of time prevented sump 2 from being dived but the way on had been found for further divers next year and hopefully, passage of master proportions.

Not far from the resurgence an obvious entrance at river level was investigated and after 75m of good sized rift passage, a choke was reached and a way on found up through a boulder pile. Some days later an old abandoned railway tunnel was explored and was found to have intersected a large natural passage which provided a novel method of access. Several climbs up steep phreatic tubes eventually led to a large main chamber. Descending an 8m pitch, a squeeze through boulders led to the lower passages previously explored from river level. A number of avens were noticed in the roof of the chamber and the largest of these was almost reached by Brian Cowie after a very exposed climb across the left hand wall but loose rock prevented success within a few metres of a furiously draughting passage. Turning to another, a climb of 8m, with aid, enabled Kev Drakely to reach a boulder floored passage. A further climb led to a chamber with several ways on, all were explored until a tight rift was met. Passing this, several hundred metres of phreatic passages were discovered.

While all this feverish exploration was taking place, Jerry Murland found a passage with a flake of rock barring progress. Application of a hammer unfor-



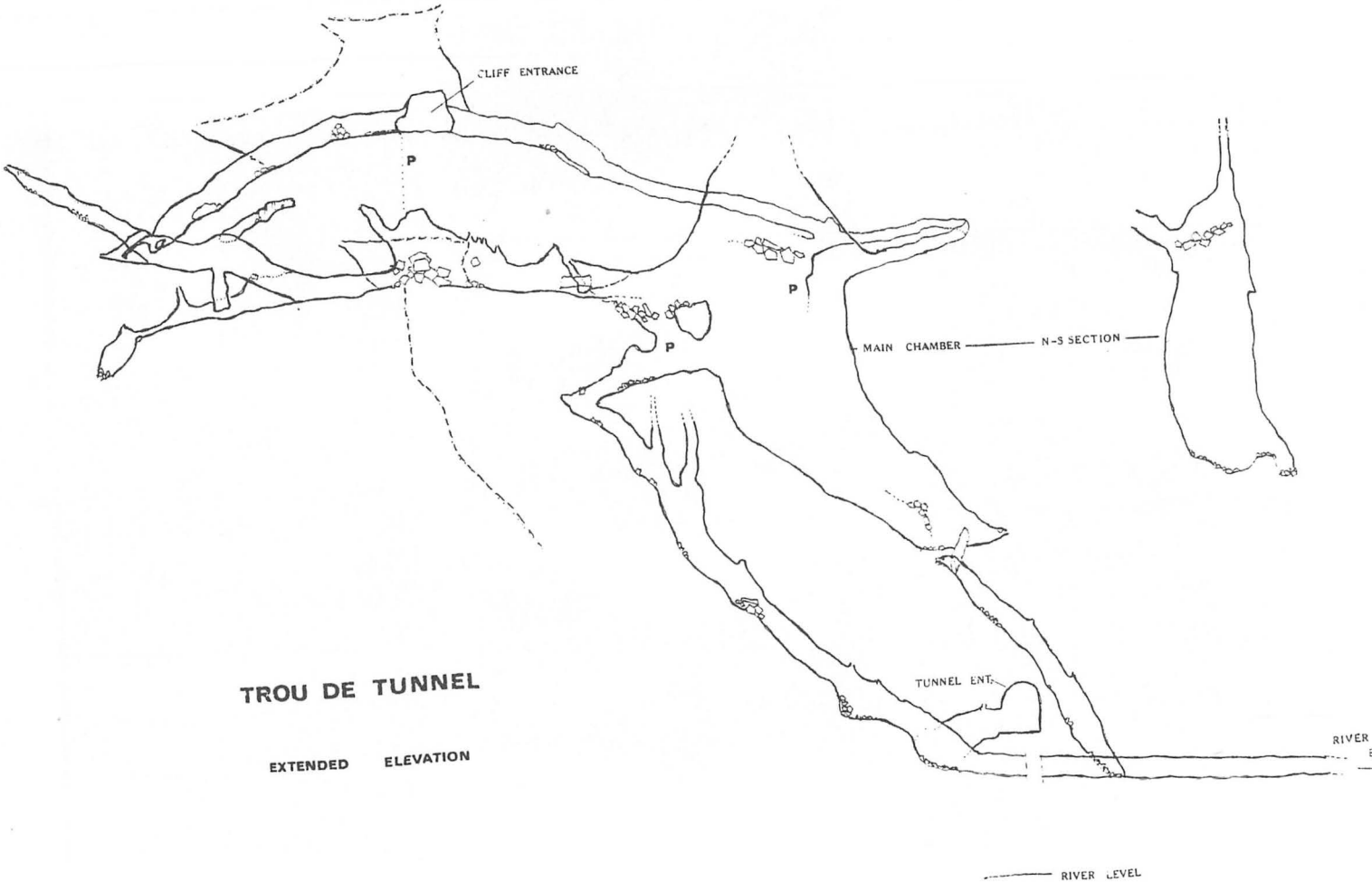
TROU DE TUNNEL

AUDE

0 5 10 M

1 625

SURVEYED BY B.COWIE, M.PHIPPS & K.DRAKELEY, 22.7.79 & 2.8.79, BCRA GRADE 4C.

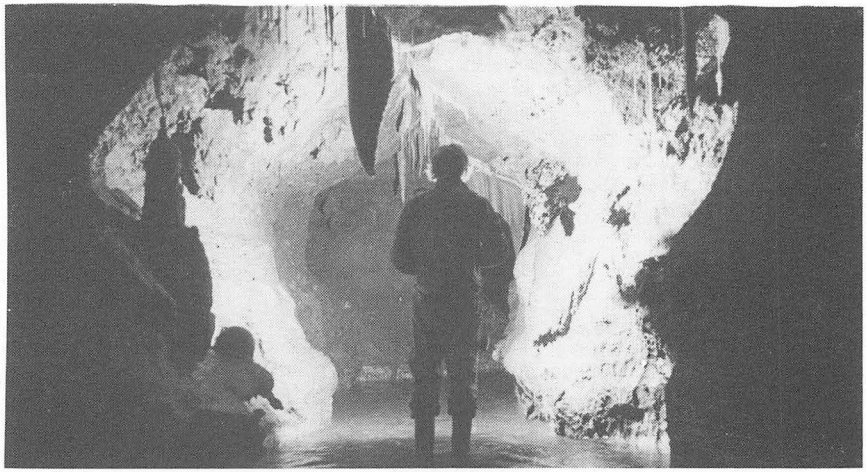


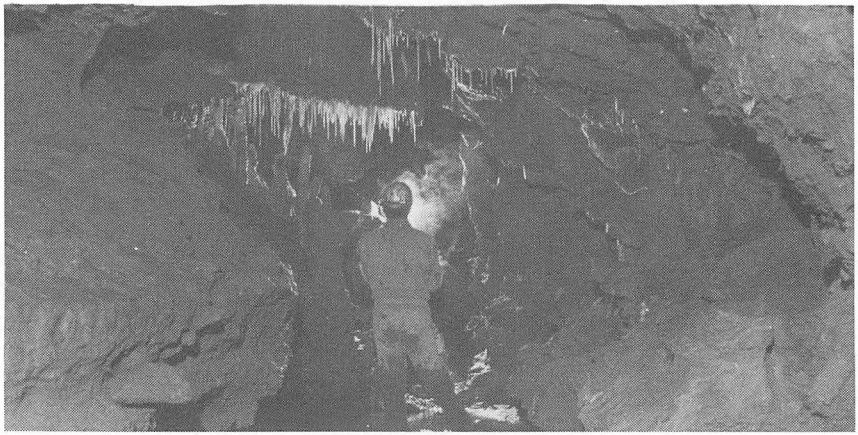
TROU DE TUNNEL

EXTENDED ELEVATION

1

2.





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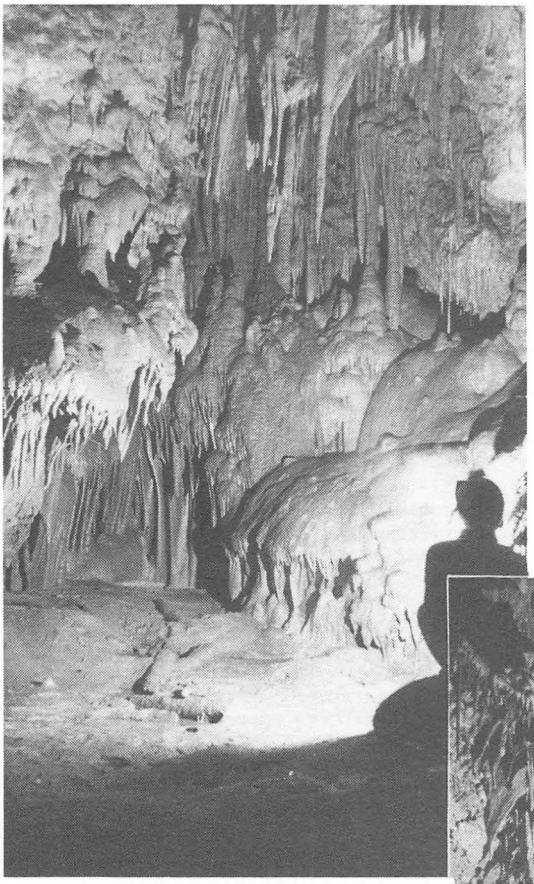
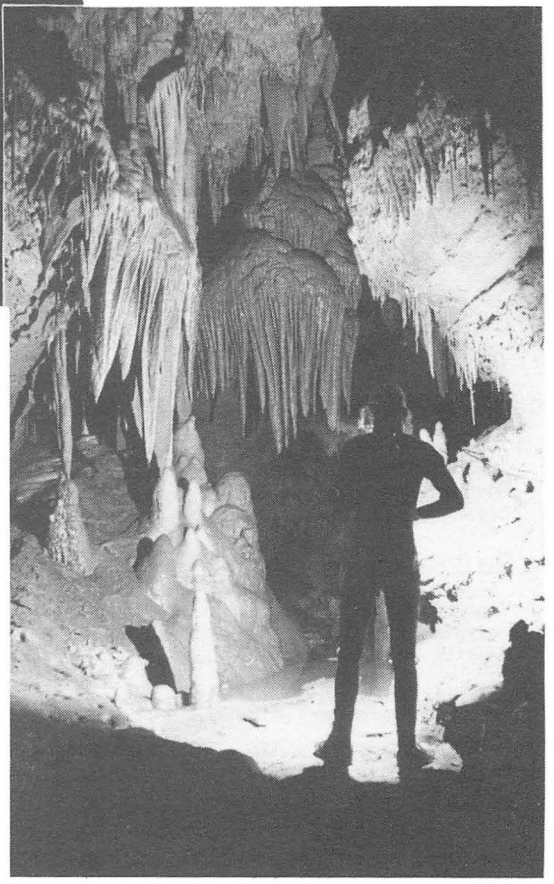


4 Photos Dave Malley

1. Tunnel Cave - Formations
2. Grotte de Fontrabiouse
   - Lower Stream Passage
3. Grotte de Fontrabiouse
   - Far Streamway
4. Grotte de Fontrabiouse
   - Upper Galleries
5. Grotte de Fontrabiouse
   - Entrance Series

5



tunately proved to be a little too energetic and several tons of rock detached itself to land on a very surprised Murland. Having survived this bombardment his shouts terminated what was turning out to be a promising days exploration. Closer inspection of the injuries revealed a large proportion of foot held on by what seemed to be the remaining threads of sock! Drakely tied it all together again with Bob Panton's shirt and the party left the cave to deposit Murland in hospital. He is still wondering why he only got visited at meal-times.

Much more remains to be found in this system and with a potential depth of 400m there is probably another 1km of passage to be discovered at high level.

High on the list of objectives was the undived terminal siphon of La Grotto de Fontrabiouse. Situated in the narrow band of limestone at the head of the gorge, this well decorated cave boasts some 7km of passage, some of it very large. The sump is at the end of some 2½km of sporting stream passage but the French had told us the dive was impossible, calling it the siphon of sand. However, reasoning that what is impossible to the French is probably a bloody great passage to a Derbyshire diver, gear was dumped at the sump in readiness for the dive a few days later. Tim Nixon found the sump to be a roomy rift but after 20m he was showered with debris from the top of the rift which prompted him to exit quickly. There is still a potential 500m of passage to be found beyond the sump but perhaps the risks outweigh further attempts.

Much more remains to be done in this area of the Pyrennees and a returning expedition could well be very successful. Had there been more time then many of the other sites the expedition examined would have probably yielded new passage to divers and non-divers alike. A successful expedition returned home via a few days in the Dordogne to the ultimate disgrace of the van breaking down on the ferry and having been towed off the boat it suddenly re-awakened to begin the trip home to Derby.

Expedition Members: Jerry Murland, Kev Drakely, Dave Malley, Steve Tucker, Rob Johnstone, Tim Nixon, Bob Panton, Geoff Attwood, Mick Phipps, Brian Cowi, Dick Robinson, Liam Kealy.

The Expedition is grateful to the following:

The Sports Council, Derbyshire Caving Association, Leicestershire Speleological Association, Orpheus Caving Club, Somerset Section C.D.G., Mr. E. Hutchinson (Mountain Sports Coventry) Dr. O. C. Lloyd, Dr. T. D. Ford, M. Devendeville (Speleo Perpignan) and Roger Flawith.

The following manufacturers supported the Expedition with generous donations:

Vista (Thermal Products) Limited, Shipmate International, Sorbo Industrial Polymers Limited, The St. Albans Rubber Co. Limited, Epigaz, Marlow Ropes, Reckitt and Colemen, May and Baker, Coleman Foods, I & M Steiner Limited.

Expedition Report

Price £1.00 + p & p 12p. Full report of all discoveries, surveys and diving reports.

From: J. D. Murland, 135 Kingsbury Road, Coundon, Coventry CV6 1PL.
Available from January 1st 1980.